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Published on Sunday, July 02, 2006.
Last modified on 7/2/2006 at 1:05 am

Gazette Opinion: Greater range of ideas needed for bison management

The dry hills that rise from the banks of the Yellowstone River at Gardiner are dotted with yellow blossoms of prickly pear and occasional antelope in early summer. But there's not a bison in sight.

This Montana territory near Yellowstone National Park's northern border was the scene last winter of hunts in which 38 bison were taken and of a capture operation that ultimately sent more than 800 to slaughter. This is winter range, the place where some Yellowstone buffalo go when snow, ice, poor forage in the park or other things tell the great, shaggy beasts to head to lower ground. In April or May, instinct tells the winter's survivors to follow the green wave back to the high country of the Yellowstone Plateau.

In past years, when bison headed into Gardiner and down Paradise Valley, it was the northern herd, the bison that spend most of their time in the Mammoth area and Lamar Valley, according to National Park Service biologist Glenn Plumb.

Surprise migration

But last winter's migration was a surprise. For reasons that biologists don't understand yet, bison from the park interior, as far south as the Hayden Valley, decided that Paradise Valley was the place to be. The bison shot by hunters east of the river at Eagle Creek were from Hayden Valley and Swan Lake Flats. So were the bison shipped to slaughter, and the 101 calves captured for a quarantine study being conducted at Corwin Springs and the 300 held at Stephens Creek corral for a month until park grass greened up. Once released, the last 300 headed back to their old stomping ground in the park's interior, Plumb said.

The unusual migration illustrates a central fact about managing wild bison in the Yellowstone area: It's complicated. The complexities have high stakes for the bison population and for Montana cattle producers fighting to maintain the state's brucellosis-free status.

Despite calls by some cattlemen for total eradication of brucellosis in wildlife, there is no hope of eliminating this bacterium in the foreseeable future. There is no brucellosis vaccine for elk. The vaccine that is effective in cattle is much less effective in bison. Labs around the world are working on better brucellosis vaccines or improvements of the one now available.

The Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks is overseeing a multiyear study to determine how much testing is necessary to if determine a buffalo herd is brucellosis-free. The National Park Service is at work on a draft environmental impact statement on remote delivery

of vaccine to bison. Then there's the daunting prospect of vaccinating thousands of large animals spread over more than 2.2 million rugged acres -- and delivering booster shots.

Call for quarantine

In March, the Western States Livestock Health Association called for a Gardiner quarantine area in which cattle entering and leaving would first have to be tested for brucellosis.

As Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer said last week, "There's nothing we have in the toolbox right now that will eliminate brucellosis."

Schweitzer restarted a discussion on bison management that had stalled at the first phase of a multiphase interagency plan mapped out six years ago. His administration revamped and re-established a state bison hunt that drew good reviews from hunters and relatively little criticism from others. Give Schweitzer credit for injecting new ideas and energy into what has been an intractable decades-long dispute.

State-federal cooperation

Schweitzer said he is committed to saving Montana's brucellosis-free status. The governor said he worked with newly appointed Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne when he was Idaho governor and expects to work with him and Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns.

"I think we can work with the feds to do good things," Schweitzer said.

The status quo on bison management isn't acceptable.

Public officials and those private individuals with land and grazing interests north and west of the park need to talk about new ways to separate bison and cattle in time and space. Creative solutions must protect cattle producers, facilitate fair-chase bison hunting and protect a healthy, genetically diverse population of America's only wild bison. Schweitzer might not have all the the answers on bison, but at least he's asking the right questions.

The public lands of the Yellowstone area should be used for the benefit of the public, which includes allowing hunting and letting some bison live to roam again.

This editorial is part of a continuing series on Yellowstone issues this year.